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Iraq needs help defending its borders after U.S. troops leave in 2011

Some form of continued U.S. military presence is necessary to protect against external threats and to train troops, commanders say. Iraq's inability to defend its airspace is a key concern.

By Liz Sly, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Besmaya, Iraq

Iraq will need U.S. military support for up to another decade to defend its borders because the Iraqi army won't be ready to guard the country when American troops leave at the end of 2011, according to U.S. and Iraqi commanders.



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Commanders say they are reasonably confident in the Iraqi security forces' ability to keep order while facing insurgents or other internal threats. But when it comes to their capacity to protect against attacks from other nations, it is inconceivable that the Iraqi army will be able to stand alone by the time U.S. troops go home, said Lt. Gen. Michael Barbero, commander of the U.S. military training program in Iraq.

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Almost certainly, he said, there will have to be some form of continued U.S. military presence beyond 2011 — a tough sell for Americans eager to see a rapid withdrawal — to protect against external threats and to provide the training necessary to eventually bring the Iraqi army up to scratch.

The gravest concern may be Iraq's inability to defend its airspace in a region bristling with missiles and fighter planes as well as longstanding jealousies and a history of wars involving border disputes. The Iraqi government placed its first order for 18 U.S. F-16 fighter jets in March, but the earliest they're expected to arrive is 2013.

"I would say we're five years into a 10-15 year program," said Brig. Gen. Scott Hanson, who heads the U.S. mission in charge of training the Iraqi air force. "We're on a glide path, but we're not in the final stages of approach."

An Iraqi Ministry of Defense strategy document projects that Iraq won't be capable of defending its

borders until 2020, said the chief of staff of the Iraqi armed forces, Gen. Babakir Zebari.

"In general, Iraqi soldiers and officers would like the American forces to stay in Iraq until they're capable of doing the job 100%," he said. "Not a huge force, just three or four bases."

U.S. officials won't give numbers, saying it will be up to the U.S. and Iraqi governments to negotiate the form and size of any future troop presence. The current security agreement obligates all U.S. forces to leave Iraq by the end of 2011, and the Iraqi government would have to request a new agreement if it wanted any to stay.

With so many uncertainties ahead, it is impossible to predict whether U.S. forces would stay beyond the deadline, analysts say. The issue is politically sensitive in both Washington and Baghdad. Much will depend on what the future Iraqi government looks like; one that is led by close allies of Iran would be unlikely to request continued U.S. military assistance.

Also in question is America's likely appetite for a long-term troop presence, and the funding that would entail. The Pentagon is appealing a Senate decision to slash by half its \$2-billion request for equipment for the Iraqi army in 2011.

The issue of the ongoing U.S. military presence in Iraq has so far received little public attention either in Washington or Baghdad. The Obama administration's Iraq policy is currently focused on fulfilling the president's pledge to bring about the "responsible" drawdown of troops to 50,000 by Aug. 31, and end the war. In Baghdad, there is no proper government, and energies are consumed these days by the struggle to form a new one.

Domestic challenges from a potential revival of the Sunni Arab insurgency, well-armed Shiite Muslim militias and tensions between the political factions still pose the biggest overall threat to Iraq's long-term stability, U.S. officials say.

But many Iraqis also fear their country's vulnerability to the ambitions of well-armed nations in the region.

"If America withdraws its forces and one of the neighboring countries causes problems, then we're going to have a problem," Zebari said.

In a harbinger of what may lie ahead, Turkish and Iranian troops recently crossed Iraq's northern border in pursuit of Kurdish rebels. Iranian troops have remained there since June, building a small fort just inside Iraqi territory. In December, Iranian troops occupied an Iraqi oil well in the south, triggering popular outrage but little action from the Iraqi government.

"There appears to have been an appalling lack of foresight on the part of American military planners," said Ted Galen Carpenter, a national security expert at the Washington-based Cato Institute, who believes the U.S. will have to maintain a substantial military presence well beyond 2011 if Iraq is not to risk becoming a trigger for regional instability. "What amazes me is that policymakers didn't seem to think this through when they decided to remove Iraq as a geostrategic player. I'm not sure what they were calculating."

U.S. military officials say they are acutely aware of the shortfall in Iraq's defensive capabilities.

"Two years ago the levels of violence were much higher than they are today. Fighting was the focus," said Hanson, the air force commander. "The whole business has required that amount of time. I don't

think anybody was asleep at the switch."

With the bulk of the basic training of the Iraqi army now complete and the State Department due to take over responsibility for police training next month, the U.S. military's training mission through the end of 2011 will be reoriented toward readying the army to defend against external threats, Barbero said.

At the Besmaya combat training center located in the desert east of Baghdad, that effort is already underway. On a recent morning, half a dozen M1A1 Abrams battle tanks provided by the U.S. military for training purposes trundled out into the dusty wilderness to practice shooting at cardboard targets while a trainee Iraqi controller barked orders from a control tower.

"What are you shooting at? There is no target! Cease fire!" he yelled at one of the crews, which seemed to be firing randomly. A spinning speck of swirling dust on the horizon, the tank corrected and hit two targets, to warm applause from the assembled American trainers and Iraqi trainees.

The M1A1s, the workhorse of the U.S. Army, are to be the centerpiece of Iraq's land defenses, and the first 11 of 140 new ones bought by the Iraqi government arrived last week. But it won't be until the middle of 2012, after U.S. troops are scheduled to depart, that the crews will be ready and all the tanks have arrived in Iraq. Iraq has an additional \$13 billion worth of arms on order or under discussion, but they could take years to be processed.

The trainee tank crews, many of them veterans of Iraq's previous wars, fret that their new, 238,000-strong army is smaller than the old Iraqi army, which once numbered more than 500,000, invaded two neighboring nations and was feared across the region.

"We need more. We need planes, tanks, armored personnel carriers, Strykers, Bradleys," said Capt. Hisham Jamil, 36, who commanded a tank crew during the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. "In terms of quality, the new army was better, but in number the old army was more."

Iraq is a long way from being in a position to threaten its neighbors again, and U.S. officials say the envisioned arms sales won't bring it near that point. Even so, some of the sales could prove controversial, and Iraq's Kurds, who were treated brutally by late President Saddam Hussein's army, have expressed opposition to the proposed F-16 deal.

Analysts say there is a broad recognition in Washington of the need for an enduring military relationship with Iraq if the huge investments in blood and money of the last seven years are not to be squandered. Obama administration officials have expressed lasting support for Iraq. Vice President Joe Biden said in Baghdad last month that the U.S. would not abandon the country after the troop withdrawal.

A modest presence of advisors and mentors beyond 2011 would probably win support, said Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service, who questions U.S. commanders' confidence in the Iraqi security forces' domestic capabilities.

"The U.S. has a long-term strategic interest there. If the whole program unravels after 2011, Iraq degenerates into sectarian conflict and the neighbors get involved, it means the whole project was flawed," he said. "I think there's a sentiment not to let that happen."

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